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MIGRANT FARM LABOR: THE PROBLEM AND WAYS OF MEETING IT

Migratory labor, necessary in the agricultural system of the Pacific Coast as it is currently operated, presents a number of western states with most pressing social and economic problems. While public attention has been directed most toward California, because that state has larger irrigated areas devoted to growing specialty crops under large-scale, industrialized methods, and consequently requires a greater volume of mobile labor, the migrant worker problem is not peculiar to California. Arizona's cotton, lettuce and truck crops, Washington and Oregon with hops, berries, apples and other fruits, Utah with beets and Idaho with beets, potatoes and other field crops, Colorado's melons and lettuce all need a large volume of so-called "hand labor" for their harvesting, processing and marketing.

Cotton picking on the high plains of Oklahoma and Northern Texas during the fall diverts some of the inter-state labor migration into that area for seasonal employment. Separate and apart from this inter-state class is a large body of Texas farm workers who migrate entirely or almost entirely within state borders. Statistics are sketchy and variable but the minimum figure is around 300,000 men, women and children who work north from winter and spring employment in truck crops in the lower Rio Grande Valley and wind up picking cotton on the Texas-Oklahoma plains in the fall months. Some observers put the Texas nomads as high as 600,000 individuals, or upward of 100,000 families. Arkansas, Florida, New Jersey, among others, have field and orchard crops that employ migrant labor of the family type.



"The industrialized labor pattern which is incipient in the cultivation of southern cotton has already flowered in Arizona and California. It is also well developed in the important truck and fruit crops of the West. The position of the landless, mobile, intermittently employed wage laborers of industry is increasingly approximated in important sections of agriculture. This raises the question whether the social security of these workers should not be sought through adaptation of techniques now used to bring social security to industrial labor.

"Mechanization of southern cotton has National repercussions, for it is feeding the stream of distressed refugees flowing steadily west who join the mobile labor reserve of agriculture from Arizona to Washington. Except for Government agencies of relief and rehabilitation, the stream of the dislodged would now be greater. The increase of migrant refugees makes more acute an old question: How shall the burden of relief and rehabilitation of those who emigrate in distress be shared between States of origin and those of destination, and with the Federal Government?"

The mounting force of this mechanization factor can perhaps be comprehended best in this statement of the increase in tractor use in Texas. Investigation of statistics by Farm Security Administration boils down to this:

"In 1920 there were only 9,000 farm tractors in Texas. In 1937 there were 99,000...and each tractor replaced from one to five tenant families.

"There is one Alabama county that had eight farm tractors a few years ago. Last year there were 260 tractors in that county and each was estimated to have forced one and one-half to two families off the land."

And these examples can be multiplied and extended throughout the crop producing parts of the nation.

All in all, this tremendous upheaval, from whatever varying causes, has increased the migrant population in the Pacific Coast states and vastly changed its racial elements, as compared to preceding eras.

The current conditions also introduce family groups, replacing the single men who formerly followed the harvests, and tends to increase the complexities. The economic and social magnitude is indicated by the fact that

more than half the geographical area of the United States is involved in this new American problem. It directly affects the lives and happiness of most of the population of the agricultural states west of the Mississippi River, and therefore in some form and degree, presently or potentially, affects vitally and basically the individual and collective welfare of the whole nation.

The federal government in 1935 launched a study and action attack on the migrant problem as part of the general Resettlement Administration rehabilitation program covering the whole field of rural poverty. In 1937 the Farm Security Administration was set up, under authority of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act, to succeed Resettlement Administration, and took over the program and continued its development.

At this date ten camps for migrant farm labor of the family type have been built in California and one in Arizona. A site has been selected and construction is planned for a similar community at Yakima, Washington, where some 35,000 workers congregate for about three months each fall for the hop and apple harvest. Requests have been made by groups and individuals for camps in Texas, Colorado, Arkansas, Florida and other states where intensive agriculture requires seasonal concentration of mobile labor during peak periods of planting, thinning and harvesting, with little or no existing provisions for shelter, health protection, schooling, wholesome recreation and other social needs and conveniences.

Wherever migrant farm labor lives, moves and has its being the physical picture, with its bad social consequences, is about the same. Excessive heat in some areas may add such somber shading as a sharp summer increase in child mortality, due to gastro-enteric diseases which health officers ascribe to eating of unripe or unwholesome fruit, drinking contaminated water, living

under crowded and insanitary conditions and so on.

Winter weather brings an increase in cases of pneumonia, influenza and pulmonary diseases. The risk of epidemics of contagious or infectious diseases, smallpox, typhoid, scarlet fever and the like, is a year round menace. The general picture of living conditions of this homeless, work-seeking army is presented graphically in a report published by the California State Relief Administration in the summer of 1936, based on a survey of an Imperial Valley ditch-bank camp, where families were congregated without public supervision or regulation. The report reads:

"Old tents, gunny sacks, dry-goods boxes and scrap tin. These are the material from which the dwellings are constructed. All the shacks visited were without floors...very dirty and swarming with clouds of flies. There were no sanitary facilities in evidence and the backyard has been used as a toilet. An irrigation ditch half-filled with muddy water has been used for all purposes."

Although they represent a large percentage of the total number making a living in agriculture, very few of the roving group boast of an annual income of more than \$450. It is impossible satisfactorily to estimate the number of migrants who follow the crops along the western coast and through the Pacific slope states. Research workers of the Farm Security Administration have estimated the figure as varying between 200,000 and 300,000 men, women and children - that is from 50,000 to 75,000 families, approximately.

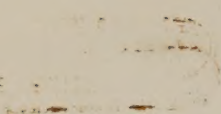
The migratory laborer of today is far different from the "blanket stiff" or "hobo" who followed the wheat harvests and worked in the lumber camps a few decades ago. Today's drifting worker travels by automobile with his family and children. In order to understand this type of worker better, it is necessary to know the conditions that have brought about the need for such labor and to examine the changes in the cultivation and growing of crops requiring peak labor needs at particular seasons and places. California, because

it has led in the development of large scale, mechanized and industrialized farming, and set the pace for similar methods and techniques elsewhere, is considered in the following description, but observation will reveal like conditions in all intensive crop states, and a general expanding trend of these conditions.

The present labor situation in California becomes apparent when one considers that in 1879 only four per cent of California's total paid farm workers were engaged in harvesting intensive crops while fifty years later more than 75 per cent of that same laboring class was so engaged. Records of several large scale farms show that while twenty acres of hops required only 12 men during the growing season, between 450 and 500 men were required during the harvest. Similar conditions exist in the deciduous fruit crops. On a 2,000 peach acre/farm, only 30 regular employees are used while 200 to 250 men are added during the pruning period, 700 are needed for thinning, and 1,000 more added for picking.

Changes in irrigation methods have brought about the shift from field crops to the growing of higher yielding crops that require large numbers of workers during the harvest. Since that change began, crop production has increased until now more than 100 different crops, harvested with peak labor needs, are marketed in carload lots. The harvesting of these crops has brought about a top labor need that is an economic necessity. So long as western agriculture follows its present trend, migratory labor must play an important part and it must be dealt with as a recognized part of the agricultural system. The movement of the migrant families is correlated with the seasonal agricultural needs, developed in the state. From July to October is the period when most of the families are shifting, and this movement is the forerunner to the peak labor requirements.

It has been the intention of the Association to publish this journal for the purpose of providing a medium for the expression of the views of the members of the Association on the subjects of medicine and surgery, and for the publication of the results of the researches of the members of the Association in the various branches of the medical and surgical sciences.



The Journal is published weekly, except on Sundays and public holidays, and is sent to the members of the Association free of charge. The subscription price for non-members is \$5.00 per annum in advance. The Journal is published by the American Medical Association, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. The Editor is Dr. J. C. Thompson, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. The Business Manager is Dr. J. C. Thompson, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. The Journal is published by the American Medical Association, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. The Editor is Dr. J. C. Thompson, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. The Business Manager is Dr. J. C. Thompson, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill.

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Because the workers must be "on the ground" for varying lengths of time prior to the actual starting of work, this anticipation has brought about a definite need for an established base for labor supply. Housing has been a universally serious problem and during peak work seasons the highways of California are dotted with squalid camps of migrants. Large growers often provide excellent housing facilities, but the smaller growers are unable to do so. The Farm Security Administration, by establishing permanent camps, has demonstrated intelligent methods of assistance in aiding these nomadic families to obtain more orderly and healthful living conditions.

Although the grouping of the tents varies in different areas, depending on the terrain and the contours of the land, the camps are laid out in orderly fashion. Tent platforms are arranged so as to give each occupant easy access to the street. The platforms are about 30 feet apart and are arranged in some of the camps in groups of forty about a community facility building. In some of the later camps a different plan has been followed, with the community so arranged that one central utility building serves the whole camp, which is laid out in a fashion to make the central building conveniently accessible from all sections. In contrast to many privately owned camps, the showers and toilet facilities are installed in proportion to the number of users and the number of such facilities can be readily increased to care for an increased demand. In estimating the number of facilities needed, each family per tent has been set at $4\frac{1}{2}$ persons on the basis of a 200 tent family camp.

The camps are constructed with the fact in mind that many of the resident families would, in a different economic situation, be considered of the tourist class. Although many of the automobiles driven by the migrants are of an uncertain age, each driver realizes that his opportunity to find work

depends on his mobility. Consequently, each camp is provided with facilities for taking care of the automobiles and trailers. The roads throughout the camps are built on a stabilized base with a coating of a good road mix. All automobiles come into the camp through a single entrance. While there are no gates across the entrance, posts are dropped into the ground at night. Operators are permitted to drive their cars freely throughout the camp and parking alongside of the tent platforms is permitted. However, garage pergolas are being erected and motorists will be encouraged to put their cars under shelter at night. Each camp has a small repair shop and, as a number of experienced mechanics are found among the workers the automobiles are given good care.

Because of its importance to the labor camps and to the vicinity surrounding the camps, the matter of sanitation has been given utmost care and consideration by the Farm Security Administration engineers. That the "squatter" camps are a definite menace to the health of great numbers of people cannot be denied. But from reports on labor difficulties between growers and pickers, it is easy to see the larger implications of the lack of clean, healthy living conditions. Too often critics of the migrant class have overlooked the fact that a great part of the present mobile group are dispossessed land holders and farmers. Regardless of how the former denizens of railroad track jungles may have felt about cleanliness, records of the federal camp managers show that no aspect pleases the camp residents more than the sanitary toilets and shower baths.

The attitude of the farm laborers toward living conditions in their former road-side camps is easier to understand from a report made to the National Labor Board concerning the labor difficulties in the Imperial Valley. The report in part read:

"There is legitimate complaint about the water taken from the irrigation ditch. It is muddy in appearance, liable to contamination...and is not purified by chemical treatment. This is not only a serious health problem to all those who use the water, but there is a distinct menace to all the people of the Imperial Valley. The diseases that follow the use of impure water are prevalent."

The source of the water supply differs in accordance with local conditions. In all the camps, except that at Brawley, wells have been driven. In each of these five camps a 15,000 gallon capacity tank has been erected on a 60 foot tower. Pressure tanks are unnecessary and the water is circulated from the tanks by gravity pressure. At Brawley, water is furnished by an agreement with the city.

Each sanitary unit or utility building is equipped with a men's and women's unit. The women's unit contains cement laundry tubs, showers and dressing rooms, sanitary flush toilets, and one sixteen foot iron washing tray with double faucets, supplying hot and cold water. With the exception of the laundry trays, the men's unit is similarly equipped. An ample amount of hot water is supplied by a central system. The sewage disposal systems function through suitably located Imhoff tanks except at Brawley, where sewage is discharged directly into a nearby river with permission of the State Board of Health. In case of the other camps, the soil was found to be impervious to the penetration of the fluid given off by the ordinary septic tank. The engineers used the Imhoff tank on these particular projects. This tank, a two story structure, will provide a more thorough and efficient disposal of waste. Three slop water hoppers are connected with the disposal plant and all garbage is burned in the camp incinerators.

Aside from the pleasing physical aspects of these model camps, the most outstanding feature is the democratic management by the residents of the

camps. With about 85 per cent of the campers coming from typical American communities and descendants of sturdy American stock, they are eager to maintain the American tradition of government. Functioning through a number of necessary committees, the "town hall" form of government decides the conduct of the camps.

A camp manager appointed by the Farm Security Administration correlates the work of the various committees and acts in a supervisory capacity.

The members of the camp elect a "Campers' Committee" which serves as the governing body of the camp. It represents the entire camp population in its relationship with the management and is the link between the two. All problems of discipline, law and order within the camp, and all controversial questions are taken care of by this committee. The camps are subject to all local laws and are subject to police and health inspection by accredited officers. The committee exercises no jurisdiction outside the camp limits and all decisions and recommendations are referred to the management for final decision.

The Farm Security Administration purchases the land and pays the salaries of the camp managers, and their staffs. Occupants of the camps furnish their own tents, furniture and cooking utensils. Each resident family pays ten cents a day into a general fund which is administered by the camp committee and the camp manager. All payments from the fund are made by check and the accounts are subject to audit by Farm Security Administration representatives.

The adult Recreation Committee takes charge of all athletic games within the camp and arranges contests with other nearby groups. Games and contests are sometimes arranged between campers and nearby farmers. As a result, there is often a better relationship between employee and employer.

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The Child Welfare Committee and the Good Neighbors are committees formed to care for the social aspect of camp life. The Child Welfare group are appointed by the visiting nurses with the approval of the camp manager to give instruction in first aid, personal hygiene and child care. Mothers are given pre-natal care and assisted in every way to carry out the instructions given by a resident nurse and visiting physician.

The Good Neighbors is a voluntary women's club of which all women residents are members. It is perhaps the outstanding group in the camps and the spirit of the Good Neighbors has reached every camp group. Reports of the camp manager are full of stories of how members of this committee have not only encouraged new-comers to make use of the varied facilities of the camp but how completely destitute migrants have been saved from relief status by the action of the Good Neighbors in providing them with food, clothes and shelter.

In nearly every case, the committees consist of a representative of each unit and each member holds office subject to recall by members of his unit. A recall petition must be signed by at least two-thirds of the members of the unit. If the committee member is recalled, an immediate election must be held to decide his successor.

No survey of the work of the Federal government's effort on the behalf of the migratory workers would be complete without mention of the labor situation. During the early days of the experimental camp, the proposals were questioned by certain conservative as well as radical unions and employers. Many labor leaders in the California agricultural areas assailed the idea. They feared the camps would be in effect concentration camps where the workers would be defenseless, while the growers were equally vigorous in their assertions that the camps would represent the hotbeds of radicalism.

There has been no labor trouble in which camp occupants have been primarily concerned. Labor disputes, of course, do occur when capital and labor are directly dependent on one another. The growers must have their fruit picked at the proper time and often a delay of a single day means loss of the entire crop. On the other hand, roving groups of laborers whose total income has been estimated at between \$400 and \$450 a year, must receive a wage that will allow an acceptable standard of living, if we are not to create a "peon" class. Whether workers live in camps maintained by the Farm Security Administration, by the workers themselves or by the growers, this conflict between the two groups is present.

The Farm Security Administration has taken no part in the differences between these groups, although the grouping of the workers in clean, healthful camps has given the growers, in many cases, more efficient labor for which farmers have been willing to pay a wage premium, usually about five cents an hour above the general scale.

The Farm Security Administration does not attempt either to accelerate or to impede the formation of labor organizations. The residents of the camps are regarded as free citizens and as such are entitled to the same rights and privileges enjoyed by any citizen in his home. The question of union organization is entirely up to the individuals concerned.

Officials of the Farm Security Administration do not consider the camps as a final solution to the problems created by migratory labor. They are intended to demonstrate better standards and patterns for private growers and State agencies to follow. The migrant groups are American people whom circumstances have forced into nomadic life and the nation must consider their plight with an understanding of its far-flung social and economic aspects and

implications. Therefore it seems a rational approach toward ultimate solution to attempt to work out their problems to the benefit of both the growers and the laborers and objective observers feel that sanitary camps, with opportunity of eliminating the homeless feeling that destroys the morale of too many uprooted families, points the way to eventual adjustments and remedies.

In this connection Dr. W. W. Alexander, administrator of the Farm Security Administration, in his report on activities of the agency to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace for the fiscal year 1937-38, says:

"The increasing mechanization of farm production is changing many former tenants into migrant farm laborers. The problems of this group, precipitated down the agricultural ladder by circumstance, have not as yet found a satisfactory answer. On the Pacific coast, where many thousands of seasonal agricultural workers have for years presented serious economic and social problems, the camps of the Farm Security Administration have continued in operation. They furnish temporary residence and sanitary facilities to the migrants. Need for additional camps in that region, and in other regions where mechanization is increasing, has been studied carefully.

"The camps, however, can by no means be termed a complete solution for the problems of this group of landless farmers. Some of the health aspects of the problem have been made less threatening; but little permanent security can be attained by migrant families through the camp program. Rehabilitation and security for these and other stranded groups are yet to be approached on a basis leading toward a permanent solution."

Probably most persons who have given thought to the subject agree that the long range goal should be stabilization of agricultural industry so that farm labor would be furnished by resident populations, housed in permanent homes. Under present fluid and changing conditions it is apparent that such a goal is not immediately attainable and migration must be dealt with by such ameliorative methods as prove practical. But, Farm Security Administration recognizes the need for developing plans and methods that are permanently curative and, in working toward this end, has built in connection with some of the camps small

